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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 004719

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TAGS: PREL KPAL IZ IS JO

SUBJECT: A STEP FORWARD ON IRAQ, BUT ELECTIONS POSTPONED UNTIL SPRING 2003

REF: A. FBIS GMP20020815000167 B. AMMAN 04526

Classified By: AMBASSADOR EDWARD W. GNEHM FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

SUMMARY

¶11. (C) King Abdullah's televised speech on August 15 carried few surprises. As expected, he announced the postponement of elections until "the spring." The King also said that responsibility for the future of Palestine and Iraq lies with their respective leaderships. Most Embassy contacts had few words of praise for the speech, and focused on the postponement of elections. However, it is important to note that the King's remarks about the responsibility of the Iraqi leadership is a welcome change from his comments to the press in London three weeks ago. End Summary.

NUANCE ON PALESTINE, IRAQ, NO SURPRISE ON ELECTIONS

¶12. (C) King Abdullah addressed the nation on August 15 in a speech (see Ref A) that was carried on Jordan television and the Lebanese satellite station MBC. The King reaffirmed that Jordan considers the PA the only legitimate leadership of the Palestinian people and that the Palestinian people are the only ones who can choose their leaders. At the same time, the King frankly and unapologetically defended Jordan's relations with Israel as good both for Jordan and the Palestinians. He also indirectly criticized Palestinian leaders, saying "the Palestinian leadership (must) shoulder its responsibilities before its people, the Arab nation, and the world." The King devoted little time in his speech to Iraq (less than a minute of his 25 minute remarks), calling "for resolving the Iraqi issue through dialogue with the United Nations rather than the threat of force or the use of force...however, at the end of the day, it is the Iraqi leadership which has to make its decision. It will be responsible for this decision before its people, its nation, and the world at large." At the end of the speech, the King focused on Jordan's domestic politics and, to the surprise of no one, announced that legislative elections would be pushed back until Spring so the elections would not be influenced by regional events.

JORDANIANS UNDERWHELMED

¶13. (C) A sampling of Embassy contacts indicates that most Jordanians heard little new in the King's speech. Most contacts believed the King did not waver from previous positions on the Palestinian issue. An East Bank businessman believed much of the King's rhetoric on the Palestinian issue was in response to the accusations made on the Al-Jazeera program, "Opposite Direction" (see Ref B). The contact opined that the King's emphasis on Jordanian solidarity with the Palestinian people was intended to counter accusations made on the show that King Hussein had betrayed the Palestinian cause. Another East Bank contact who was formerly a member of the Muslim Brotherhood believed the speech's emphatic rejection of a "Jordanian option" for the Palestinians signaled a change in Jordanian policy--away from considering the Palestinian cause an internal issue. "The King seemed to be saying that the Palestinian cause is a regional issue not a domestic one."

¶14. (C) In contrast to the media blitz of the last month, the King said relatively little about Iraq and few contacts noted the Iraqi aspect of his speech. However, one East Bank contact said that he thought the speech was "straightforward, even bold, in putting the responsibility on the Iraqi leadership."

¶15. (C) At the end of the speech, the King made the announcement that he had been telegraphing for weeks -- that Parliamentary elections would be postponed until Spring. The King argued that elections should be postponed so that "these elections be free and fair and far from the influence of the conditions facing the region". Reaction to the postponement among our contacts has split along East Bank-West Bank lines. East Bankers generally favored the postponement, while Palestinians were critical, but many agreed that elections

are likely to be delayed further, at least until next Fall. Former Prime Minister Tahir al-Masri told Poloff that the issue of elections spoiled the entire speech. Al-Masri said that the Palestinian issue will delay elections now, and confidently predicted that "the U.S. invasion of Iraq will force a delay again in the Spring." The Islamic Action Front (IAF) issued a public statement calling the postponement "unconstitutional" and added that "postponements will open the way for more postponements."

TIMING OF SPEECH: LONG OVERDUE

16. (C) While the King's rhetorical skills and command of formal Arabic continue to improve, many Jordanians believe the King should address his people more frequently, in light of all the difficult issues facing Jordan. One intellectual told Polfsn that "the speech was part of the King's checklist: socks, pants, speech, raincoat, etc...he zipped his suitcase and off he went--people didn't even know he was in town, let alone that he had a speech to give!" One East Bank contact said that the King should have delivered the speech a long time ago.

COMMENT

17. (C) The King's address was an attempt to reassure Jordanians that he understands their frustrations and concerns. The King's clear statements that the Palestinian and Iraqi leaderships bear ultimate responsibility for the fate of their peoples -- a sentiment rarely heard here amid speculation of U.S.-led conspiracies -- are welcome. The language on Iraq was much more nuanced than the King's remarks to the British press three weeks ago. Senior officials have told the Ambassador that this speech was the first step in repositioning the GOJ's position on Iraq. He was told that the public line would slowly move the focus to Iraq's responsibilities under UN resolutions.

18. (C) The postponement of elections was no surprise -- the King and government have been telegraphing this punch for several months. The security arguments proved paramount. However, on elections as on other human rights issues, we believe we should continue to press the Jordanians to open the political system as they have liberalized the economic system over the last three years.

GNEHM